

ROBERT C. AMERSON

Interviewed by: Allen Hansen

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Q: This is side one of tape one of an interview with Robert C. Amerson, Retired Foreign Service Officer, USIA. Today is May 5, 1988 and we're in Washington, D.C. Bob Amerson joined USIA in 1955 and held a number of top positions in the Agency before retiring 24 years later in 1979. Before joining USIA he worked in public relations for General Mills in Minneapolis, Minnesota. His first assignment was as press attaché^{1/2} at the American Embassy in Caracas, Venezuela. From there he served in Italy for four years on three assignments ending as press attaché^{1/2} in Rome. He returned to Latin American issues when he became Director of USIS in Bogota, Colombia 1963-1966, Public Affairs Advisor to the Latin American Bureau of the Department of State, 1966-68, and Assistant Director of USIA for Latin America 1968-71. This was followed by two European tours as PAO of USIS Madrid and PAO of USIS Rome. (As he told me with a smile, someone had to fill those jobs.) Just prior to his retirement he was the Murrow Fellow in Public Diplomacy at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy in the Boston area. Since his retirement from USIA he has kept active in international affairs as a consultant in international communication, as a research associate at the Murrow Center, as Executive Director of the International Business Center in Boston and as an active member and past president of the Boston Center for International Visitors. The interviewer today is Allen Hansen. Bob, I understand that you were in the Public Relations Department of General Mills before joining USIA. What did you do there?

Immediate post-college position at General Mills: Entree to USIA

AMERSON: That's right. I came out of Macalester College (which is in the Twin Cities, Minnesota, as well) with a degree in journalism and looked around for a job in 1950. And the best opportunity that came up in my view was in public relations - it was called public services, actually - for General Mills. Making that choice, I must say, affected my international future in a very considerable way. Because it turned out that the manager of the Public Relations Department for General Mills at that time was a young man of international interests and public affairs involvement whose name was Abbott Washburn. Abbott was already involved with such action as the Eisenhower campaign and later the Crusade for Freedom with General Clay. Then the Jackson Committee that was responsible for formulating the basis for the creation of USIA, as we know, in 1953. And, of course, he became Deputy Director. I watched all this with my eyes open and mouth watering. And I thought, hey, I'd like to do something like that too. That's part of what attracted me to Washington and this agency.

Q: So the fact that you know Abbott Washburn, knew what he was involved in, that got you interested in USIA primarily.

AMERSON: Yes, though I may have become interested anyway. I was involved with international affairs all the while I was working in public relations at General Mills. For instance, I worked closely with the Junior Chamber of Commerce in Minneapolis and with the Junior Chamber International, and had become just before I joined the agency the national chairman for international relations of the US Jaycees, which kind of kept me in touch with international affairs. But it was Abbott's being in Washington and being involved in a new outfit called USIA that put the focus specifically on this agency.

Early USIA Assignment to Caracas

Q: Caracas was your first assignment. Can you tell us some of your impressions of Caracas in those days and how your new job differed from your old one with General Mills?

AMERSON: Well, there were parallels and there were differences. Some differences, first: My wife, Nancy, and I and our baby Jane, six months old at the time, took ourselves out of Minnesota, came to Washington for two months of training during the hot summer of 1955, got on an airplane; a motor went out and we had to return to New York to repair that. We finally arrived in Caracas at two o'clock in the morning. And lo and behold, the man waiting for us at the airport was my new boss, George Butler by name, the PAO in Caracas. That was our introduction, really, to the extended family concept that USIA and the foreign service in general became for us.

So that was the first difference, living overseas in a foreign country. I had been in other foreign countries before but never with a family and never with a job. There were some interesting perspectives in cross-cultural communications, the need to know Spanish. And by the way, I must point out that nobody tested me in Spanish before I took off for this job where Spanish was an absolute requirement. I guess they took my word for it. Perhaps I had an honest face in those days, I don't know. But it's a mark of the early lack of professionalism, I think, in our organization that nobody took the trouble to make sure this guy could communicate in the language he would need to use.

Q: And you hadn't studied Spanish before then.

AMERSON: As it happened I'd minored in Spanish in college and I'd spent a summer in Mexico. Languages have always been a sort of a hobby anyway. And in fact while I was in Venezuela I learned Italian pretty well just because it gave me pleasure, as the saying goes. But that's another story.

There were some interesting experiences getting adjusted to the new life of foreign service. I suppose they're so common to all of us in our experience that they're hardly worth recounting here. But it was pleasurable learning about the new life in a setting that was certainly unique and for us very positive. For one thing the climate, as you well know - eternal spring every day of the year. That for a mid-westerner was not too hard to take.

Receptivity of Venezuelan Media to USIA Output

Q: I recall, because I was with you in Caracas in those days, that you were amazed at the receptivity of the Venezuelan press, regarding the USIS releases. I guess when you were in private industry the Public Relations Department of General Mills didn't always make the front pages.

AMERSON: That's a fairly accurate statement, all right. We'd send out press releases that would make the business pages of the Minneapolis newspapers and the trade press perhaps. But that's the nature of industrial public relations. So to contrast that with what I found you guys had already established, and which I carried on after arrival in Caracas, was a major jump into a different league. Because there we were, as you well know, writing political columns, writing cultural columns that appeared under our fictitious bylines, in some of the most prestigious and widest-circulation papers in the country. We were broadcasting political commentary five minutes a day, everyday, five days a week over one of the main radio stations. We had a half hour of international review with a hard-hitting international story line - a dramatic show, anti-communist for the most part, and pro-U.S. obviously. So we were in the meat and substance of propaganda, if you will, and making quite a difference in what people of Caracas, of Venezuela could read and hear. Television came later.

Q: Right. You and George Butler were very much involved in initiating a television program.

Inauguration of a USIS Sponsored and Oriented TV Program

AMERSON: Oh, indeed so. George Butler had many gifts of special abilities. One of the early technological whiz kids, as you know. He already had experience in television, and parenthetically in music - played the electric guitar like nobody else I'd ever sat next to before. So these talents were parlayed along with his professional USIS interests into exploiting this new medium called television. About late '55 or early '56 we decided to create a USIS television series. He really did the legwork on it; I was his assistant and later took it over. But he conceived the idea: "Venezuela Looks Towards its Future" - "Venezuela Mira Su Futuro."

We engaged the services of the top star of radio and television entertainment, Renny Ottolina, who also worked for us in that international radio review I was talking about, as the narrator and producer. This was a natural thing for Rennie. His friendly attitude regarding the United States was genuine - all television people really were oriented towards the USA because so much of what they had to learn came from the north - his self-taught English included American slang; he didn't mind being called "the Dave Garroway of Venezuela."

So we began this program. The format of it was that Rennie, as the narrator and interviewer, would be talking with an invited guest each time. And the purpose of the thing was to demonstrate to the television audiences how much Venezuela and the United States shared in history, in present outlook, in what we had to work for together towards the future, in various fields.

Q: It was a weekly program?

AMERSON: Weekly program Saturday nights. So my weekends were shot. But what was unique about this program was that George, because of his technical capability, was also the first director. When I say director that means he was the guy who sat down initially behind the switches up in the control booth and told the cameras what to do, using English expressions, as in American TV stations: dolly in, dolly back, and so forth. He taught me how to do all this, of course. Fade the images. So he ran the two cameras in the studio in addition to putting the show together. I took over from him when he left the post - I think that was in '56 - and it was a good success right up through the revolution, even, which came about two years later.

Q: I want to ask you about that in a minute. George Rylance replaced George Butler?

AMERSON: No, Harry Casler was the man who replaced Butler as PAO. George Rylance came to his first post also in Venezuela. George and Betty and my wife and I and Harry and Rosemary Casler, became close friends: we really liked each other and we shared so many significant experiences. We were all there through this revolution which we're going to talk about.

Preface to Revolution That Overthrew Perez Jimenez Regime

Q: When you first arrived it was really the heyday of the Perez Jimenez regime, wasn't it? Would you comment about the government situation in Venezuela at that time?

AMERSON: Sure. Venezuela was known mainly by North Americans who followed Latin American affairs as the boom country: petroleum was, in a word, the reason for its economically robust condition. There was a very high level of American investment in Venezuela - something close to \$3 billion - mostly in the strategically important oil industry. Protecting those oil and U.S. business interests, working for stability in this government, were keystones of U.S. policy towards Venezuela.

Well, I'd never really lived in a military dictatorship before. I'd visited countries under this kind of rule, but to work with local media, as the Information Officer is required to do, to watch government pressure and censorship in action, was by itself quite an education. We observed all of this through '55, '56, '57 as the tensions grew and the frustrations mounted among the journalists. Over that time, naturally, through personal contacts with media people, we built up a lot of friendships and confidences. Others in the Embassy were building similar personal relationships - in labor, the church, political groups. And so when things finally exploded these contacts paid off in a handsome way for us at the Embassy because we were then close to people who were in the opposition and about to take charge.

Q: Was the Nixon visit before Perez Jimenez left or after?

AMERSON: No, if the Nixon visit had come while Perez Jimenez was in power there wouldn't have been any problems, because the regime had means to control political demonstrations. Vice President Nixon's "good-will tour" around Latin America came about three months after the revolution, when Venezuela was still coming out of chaos. The police had disappeared when Perez Jimenez fled the country.

The sequence was something like this: In January of 1958 the people, in effect - specifically, clandestine political movements and dissident elements within the military - rose up against Perez Jimenez, because of corruption, because of widespread dissatisfaction under a regime where civil rights were restricted, where political prisoners were tortured. Everybody knew of something that they could blame the Perez Jimenez regime for. He'd been in power, this tubby little colonel, for more than five years, talking about "economic democracy" - his regime was going to make the Venezuelans prosperous and happy by building roads and hotels on top of mountains, stuff like that.

Q: There was a lot going on economically.

AMERSON: No question about it. They had an ambitious building program much of which was impressive, some of which was ill-conceived. The famous superbloques, for instance. These superbloque buildings in the poor areas at the edge of the city were designed to house needy people in a low-cost but rather flamboyant and showy way, moving them out of the hillside ghettos into big blocks of 12-story apartment buildings. Sometimes this didn't work because many of those people displaced from the hillsides really would have preferred to remain in their little shacks at ground level where they could keep some chickens and grow a garden. And they didn't know what to do about those high-rise apartment buildings where you had running water until the plumbing broke, and were expected to keep things clean. You had to give the regime some credit for trying. But it was not always well conceived.

The Actual Downfall and Flight of Perez Jimenez

Q: Before the Nixon visit, then, Perez Jimenez was overthrown.

AMERSON: He was overthrown, and one of the moments in my own life that I'll never forget was the day he left. Because for nearly three weeks there had been ferment and tensions and people in the streets, riots and buses being burned, airplanes strafing the presidential palace, that kind of thing. And eventually it became clear that even though he'd gotten rid of his hated secret police chief - remember the smooth, oily, Pedro Estrada? - and some of the other military people as symbols, this wasn't going to be enough. He would have to leave too. Our house was located, as you'll remember, not very far from a small airport in the city.

Q: La Carlota.

AMERSON: La Carlota, right. Harry Casler, my PAO at the time, called me about 2:00 a.m. to say he'd been informed by some of the politicians that we might soon hear the roar of the DC-4 that is carrying Perez Jimenez out of this country. Literally at that moment, we listened outside: an airplane was taking off. Goodbye, dictator, never to be seen again - we thought.

So he was gone and there was noisy jubilation in the streets the next morning. The national security secret police headquarters was sacked and burned. And the police disappeared because they were symbols of the hated regime as well. For the two or three days there was tension and potential chaos. But the Boy Scouts ran the traffic and people complied. There was looting of some of the houses of the regime officials, but not widespread violence. They conducted themselves very well, the Venezuelans.

Q: And television now was used, was it not, by the new government headed by Admiral Wolfgang Larrazabal?

AMERSON: Television was probably used but it was not a major tool. Radio probably still had more political impact. In fact I can almost hear those voices now as we're talking, those strident voices we listened to during the first days of the revolution, over the rebel radio. "Venezolanos, a la calle - let's go out to the street!" You know, the call for revolution. Those sounds remain with one forever. Another sound of the revolution was honking of automobile horns - in jubilation, and especially symbolic because horns had been forbidden by the Perez Jimenez regime.

Embassy USIS contacts with media helped U.S. relations during post-revolution period

So there was a feeling of great release generally, and considerable satisfaction on my part as well. The day after the revolution one of my press contacts who had been involved with some of the underground political activities came in wearing a beret, bleary eyed after no sleep, with a two-day growth of beard, and said, "See, I told you so! Here's what we've done!" Of course, it was very important for them that the American government soon recognize the revolutionary forces, and the role of the American Embassy was important. Because there were several journalists involved in this underground movement I found myself involved in political communications for awhile more than normal press attaché½ work.

Q: And Venezuela has had freely elected governments ever since I think, haven't they?

AMERSON: Venezuela has since that moment indeed maintained a democratic base. I was talking with a couple of former Embassy colleagues the other day about that. We concluded that we at the Embassy at that time had a good team of solid people there and maybe contributed something to that base. Certainly we gave encouragement to the right people. The Vice President Nixon Visit

Q: Then some months later Vice President Nixon came, which almost turned into a tragedy.

AMERSON: That's right. The revolution was in January; he came in May. And the reason it became a problem was because of the still-unsettled nature of the country. Of course it's a given in Latin America that there's going to be some general resentment about having to live in the shadow of Uncle Sam, whose every move can make a difference in the lives of his smaller neighbors.

But now there were some specifics as well. Strong nationalist feeling about the United States over the years having cozied up to Perez Jimenez, having in fact awarded him a few weeks earlier a special official honor. This was part of the Administration's policy - maintaining stability, keeping the oil flowing, supporting U.S. investments and so forth. But the idea of officially honoring a military dictator was poorly thought through, because the popular resentment against the U.S. thus created was just enormous. That plus the fact that Perez Jimenez by this time had sought and been awarded exile in Miami. So we were harboring their former dictator as well as Pedro Estrada, his hated secret-police chief. All of these emotional things were causing heated resentment.

But the main factor that produced impact and danger during the Nixon visit was, in a word, agitation - professional planning and organization led, naturally, by the communist party of Venezuela which had been prohibited under the dictatorship functioned as part of the underground resistance, and had emerged as national heroes, to many. And they had effective anti-American material to work with. Besides the U.S. award and then exile for the dictator, as mentioned a moment ago, there as the matter of a letter written by a former American ambassador - a professional FSO. He'd been a very good ambassador, but he had indiscreetly written right after Christmas a Holidays greeting to the secret-police chief, something to the effect that, with reference to an abortive revolution attempt, "I see you've had a little problem there, but I expect you boys are taking care of it. . ."

Past American "coziness" with Perez Jimenez regime spark anti-Nixon riots

Well, this letter then was discovered by opposition forces when they wrecked secret police headquarters, and they held it as a bit of condemning evidence about American complicity with Perez Jimenez. It was published in the new Communist newspaper - the edition just before the Nixon visit, showing a full-page photo of the VP, retouched to give him sharp, animal teeth.

So by the time Nixon arrived there was a good deal of primitive political passion among certain elements, and some doubt within the Embassy as to whether this visit was a wise idea. But the decision was made: we should not back down now, especially in the face of Nixon's problem a few days earlier in Lima, San Marcos University, where he'd had some adversarial and highly publicized confrontations with students.

So he and Mrs. Nixon arrived as scheduled on their special U.S. Air Force plane. What images this recalls, for anyone who was there at the airport! Who can forget the sight of those crowds that had been bused down by the professional agitators and organizers, the banners that had been printed up for it, their stationing themselves in the balcony above where the Nixons and the official party had to pass. This arrangement allowed the demonstrators to throw things down, shout epithets and even spit on the visiting Vice President and his wife. This agitation escalated into a major security problem by the time the motorcade reached the city and could have cost lives - including those in the Nixon party.

Fortunately, in that mob scene, the cars did not turn over. They were badly beaten upon and dented, windows smashed, spittle all over them. They were a sight to behold! (I was just looking at a Life Magazine of that time a couple of days ago and it brings back the realities.) The official Nixon party finally took refuge in the American Ambassador's residence.

Q: They had to go all through town then.

AMERSON: That's right. They cancelled plans to lay a wreath at Simon Bolivar's tomb at the Pantheon; because the assistant naval attaché who'd been sent there with the wreath to give to Nixon had been attacked, in a sense, and the wreath taken from him, torn to shreds. There was such a well-organized mob around the Pantheon, that it was decided on the spot the Nixon party would not stop there but would go directly to the American Ambassador's residence. Well, they made it safely. Some felt concern, even, that the Embassy residence might be attacked, but that was never a real likelihood. There was a question as to whether the VP should give a press conference; this he did, and he conducted himself with great dignity. He's never been higher in my esteem than he was at that moment, speaking with such reserve and calm about it not being easy to see one's wife being spit upon, and that kind of thing. But still statesmanlike in his reaction although he was obviously seething beneath it all. So I gained some respect for the political leadership of Richard M. Nixon that day.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to comment about with regard to your first assignment in Venezuela?

AMERSON: Well, we could talk for three days about that first assignment in Venezuela - four years, first post, Venezuela's revolution and the Nixon visit and all the policy implications of that. But I guess we have other lives to live. So we might as well move along.

Assignment to Italy

Q: Italy must have been a real change of pace, though many Italians had immigrated to Venezuela during the time you were there. But in Italy you were first assigned to Milan?

AMERSON: Well, to go back a little, I had submitted the famous April Fool's sheet - remember when they were sent around? Every April you could name posts where you'd like to be sent to. So I took a flyer and said I'd like to go to a small post in Italy, why not? And lo and behold it came true. I don't know if the reason for this partly was that I had learned some Italian, since one of our local employees in Caracas was a linguist, and he and I used to enjoy sitting with the Italian immigrants over at the cafe and at the barber shop, practicing. So my Italian was about at a three level by the time I left Caracas to go to Milan.

Milan, a change of pace indeed. A major, industrial, sophisticated, cultured, tightly organized city, so far from the underdeveloped world of booming Caracas. From an Information Officer's point of view the differences were particularly dramatic. For instance, in Caracas we were placing in the newspapers several USIS opinion columns every week, column length size, plus all kinds of photographs. Our movies were running constantly on the three television stations. Radio was carrying our stuff. We had a lot of media access in Venezuela.

In Milan, as Assistant Branch PAO, I found in press operations that when we got maybe a two-inch item on page 36 of the Corriere della Sera about a cultural event in our little Milan library, it made us feel pretty good. One item every couple of days or so. It was simply a different kind of post. We ran a library and information center. We sent out releases to the northern Italian area, smaller towns. Max Kraus was my branch PAO, and I learned a lot from him. He knew Milan - and still does, must say - very well. It was a period of learning for me.

I was there for only about six months before word came that I was soon to be sent somewhere else - down the highway to Bologna. I resisted some just on the basis of ten months not being long enough get anything done at any post - to say nothing about having to move the family and all that. By this time we had two daughters, one having been born in Venezuela. I think it was CPAO Mickey Boerner or maybe Deputy PAO Ed Schechter, down in Rome, who made it clear that this was not a suggestion or an invitation. This was going to be an order.

An Academic Interlude in Bologna

Well, it turned out to be a very good thing. Because going to Bologna not to work but to have a year off at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, the Bologna Center, was very, very rewarding.

Q: Were these courses in Italian or English?

AMERSON: Mainly in English, except that we did have some European professors, and at least one conducted his course in Italian, as agreed by the class. I worked on my French some as well. The student body was about half American graduate students, and half European. So it was quite an international experience. In those years Grove Haines, who established the Bologna Center, was still the director there. He strongly emphasized the notion of European studies and an integrated Europe. We did some study-traveling around the area and made visits to such places as NATO and Berlin. It was a very good time to get a handle on what was going on in Western Europe.

Q: You got the total European view.

AMERSON: That's right. The end of that year coincided with what was known as the Vienna summit with Khrushchev and Kennedy. And so just before going from Bologna to Rome as press attaché^{1/2}, I got agreement from CPAO Mickey Boerner, who was going to be on TDY in Vienna to handle some of the enormously complicated press arrangements, that I could be there too, to learn and to lend a hand. That was my first experience with summitry as such, pretty interesting by itself.

Q: There were a number of high-level visits when you were press attaché½ in Rome.

The Kennedy Trip to Italy - And Europe

AMERSON: Oh, boy. I'll say. Everybody comes to the Eternal City. In the Kennedy-Johnson years I was press attaché½ in Rome only about two years. The president came once - you may remember his only trip to Europe.

Q: Was this President Kennedy?

AMERSON: Kennedy. He went to Germany, Berlin - "Ich bin ein Berliner" - that famous trip where Berliners were wildly cheering him in the streets because he represented to them hope and security. He went on to Ireland where his Irish ancestry celebrated his presence with great, enthusiastic crowds. Then he came to Rome, and the Romans had been watching dignitaries come into their town for 2,000 years. I still remember the dismay of the staffers around, the White House guys, you know. What's the matter? Where's the enthusiasm? This is President Kennedy, leader of the Western World! There were some Romans who actually stopped sipping coffee and would wave or something from the sidewalk as the Kennedy motorcade passed by. But Rome was sort of jaded with the tradition: this was just another in a long series of visiting dignitaries. However, the day was saved in this regard by having the President helicopter down to Naples, where he gave a talk at NATO headquarters. The Neapolitans are different from the Romans, and there he found the enthusiasm and wildly cheering crowds that the White House people were all looking for. So they finally departed Italy very happy.

Lyndon Johnson's Visits to Italy as Vice President

Q: Then President Johnson took office while you were still there and he came to Rome?

AMERSON: No, during these two years he came to Rome three times as Vice President. Well, we can get into all kinds of ramifications of all this but I think it's safe to observe that Lyndon Johnson did not seem to have an easy time traveling as Vice President. No deputies perhaps ever do. But he chafed kind of obviously at being number two. And so he - and especially the people around him - reflected all this by making what seem to me still ridiculous, unreasonable demands about how this visiting Vice President should be treated.

For instance, the advance party would specify to the Embassy that when the Vice President lands he shall be photographed only from the right side (or the left side, I forget now which was considered Mr. Johnson's preferred profile). How are you going to stop people from photographing on both sides? So we had to construct our press arrangements at the airport with that in mind. And at the Excelsior Hotel he would require a shower that was 6'4", as I recall - if it isn't already there, change it. He had to have a bed that would accommodate his long frame. He would demand to see art works at any time of day or night. He would expect the artist to bring them up to his room so he might select something.

In short, this group around Johnson exhibited a degree of arrogant, imperious, unreasonableness that I never saw equalled in other public figures operating abroad - the Nixons or Fords, to say nothing of such prominent politicians as Hubert Humphrey who was always much more thoughtful in his expectations.

Q: And it didn't change when Johnson became President.

AMERSON: I suppose not. I did not have to endure any of those. Perhaps when they're Presidential visits, demands made on an Embassy seem less unreasonable.

Q: Right. And USIS played a major role in all these.

AMERSON: Inevitably, sure. Setting up the press centers, maybe escorts, working out press releases and press translations, taking care of the visiting press - all that of course is fundamental. But high-level visits always make a big impact on any post. And I guess that part of it hasn't changed at all over the years, has it?

Other Prominent Visitors in Rome, e.g. Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton

Q: No. I also understand that Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton were filming Cleopatra at the time you were there.

AMERSON: Yeah.

Q: You had to escort people to see some of that occasionally?

AMERSON: As I say, everybody seems to come to Rome sooner or later. Groups of Congressmen would be out there on a pretty regular basis - to find facts, naturally. In the early sixties out at Cinecitta' Burton and Taylor were indeed filming "Cleopatra," and it was becoming a famous movie already because it was breaking records, running over budget of some \$22 million, as I recall. Doesn't sound like as much today as much as it did then. But "Gone With the Wind" was done in 1939 for four million. And so now to have "Cleopatra" at \$22 million made it newsworthy.

Those were also the days when Liz Taylor - at least as glamorous then as she is now - was putting "Cleopatra" in additional headlines because she and her co-star Richard Burton obviously had something going while Eddie Fisher, her current husband, was driving around Cinecitta' in a green Rolls Royce convertible. So there was broad public curiosity as to what was going on out there. A group of Congressmen was invited to the set, I guess by 20th Century Fox to generate publicity and support. For some reason, it fell to me as press attaché to escort them. I remember we had the Congressmen standing around the room that somebody had arranged. Finally, Cleopatra came out in costume, between takes, obviously complying to Fox's request. And everybody just stood around and kind of stared - ogled, maybe - while Liz looked uncomfortable, and nobody said anything until one of the Congressman sidled towards her and announced tremulously: "I came, I saw, I conquered!" Then everybody looked embarrassed some more, and we left. The episode still seems to me one of the more bizarre sidebars to an assignment in the Eternal City.

To Bogota and First Country PAO Assignment: Colombia As It Was In 1960s

Q: From Rome you went to Bogota. And this was your first PAO ship. That was in 1963, and Colombia had not yet become one of the major sources of illicit narcotics.

AMERSON: Oh, no.

Q: What was Bogota like in those days?

AMERSON: Well, let me preface the specific reply by a reference. We came on direct assignment from Rome through Washington the week of November 22, 1963, which means that we were here on my last day of consultation when the news came that President Kennedy was shot. The funeral was on the day we got on the airplane to fly into Bogota. So we were in kind of a different era already. President Kennedy and Jackie had visited Colombia; after his death they were almost deified there, of course. So that made for representatives of the U.S. government, of the Kennedys' country, an aura of glory tinged with sadness. For a while the Alliance for Progress and all those ideals associated with the martyred President gave to us, in our work and in our personal relations, a special quality.

Q: What role did USIS Bogota have with respect to the Alliance?

AMERSON: Well, those were the years when we had Alliance for Progress Information Officers you may remember, working closely with AID. We did a lot of press and media relations, visits to projects, that kind of thing, to publicize and encourage achievements. Speeches, by the ambassador especially, to emphasize our working together towards common goals. And there was great hope and optimism. This was long, long before the shadow of illicit drug dealing became such an important factor in that part of Latin America. There wasn't any comparable major negative issue, those years when I was there. I suppose we were lucky in that sense.

We think very fondly back on Bogota of the Sixties. Because in Colombia the people had a special quality it seemed to us. Maybe this was optimism. Nancy worked with a group of Colombian women, in social projects - the only country where this happened in our experience. They really knew how to get things done, working with the YMCA and a group running a day care center. Somehow there was an attitude of let's solve problems together and be cordial about it at the same time. In another category, Colombia has this nice diversity of musical traditions. We enjoyed that. And such a variety of terrain - from the coast of Cartagena and Barranquilla, up into the high plains of Bogota at 8,000 feet where it's always kind of cool. And even into the jungles of Leticia, deep along the Amazon - a fascinating place to visit. So Colombia remains a lovely country of considerable affection in our mind; and I think we did some good work there.

Q: The Binational Cultural Center in Bogota is practically world class.

AMERSON: Well, it was then.

Q: Was that well on its way at that time?

AMERSON: Yes, we moved to the new center that had just been constructed in my early months there and under the directorship of Milt Leavitt and others it became a major cultural operation. I think it's going quite well today.

Q: Definitely.

AMERSON: That's nice to know.

1966: Washington Assignment: P.A. Advisor to Department of State's Latin American Bureau (ARA)

Q: In 1966 you returned to Washington and you were assigned to the State Department as the public affairs advisor for the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Latin America. Who was the Assistant Secretary at that time? And what were your duties?

AMERSON: The Assistant Secretary for Latin America - or ARA as it's known in State parlance, for American Republics Area - was then Dr. Lincoln Gordon who had been Ambassador in Brazil and, earlier, a distinguished Professor of Economics at Johns Hopkins. He later became President of Johns Hopkins as you know. The job of the Public Affairs Advisor for the bureau was, as the title implies, to work with the Assistant Secretary and his staff on public activities, from daily media inquiries to major speeches or television appearances.

I was glad for this opportunity to see how the State Department functioned. Overseas, State and USIS are integrated, hand-in-glove; it was useful in this assignment to the Department to learn more about the relationships in Washington.

Preparing for the daily noon briefing was the first requirement of the day, to see what's in the newspapers, try to guess what the reporters who cover the State Department are likely to ask.

Q: With respect to Latin America?

AMERSON: Yes; other bureaus were going through the same exercise. Bob McCloskey, one of the best government spokesman ever to face reporters, handled the noon briefing for the department those days. We would sit with him, starting about eleven o'clock, to go over what we had that he was likely to be asked that day, give him the background or policy guidance for it which would have been cleared by our deputy assistant, usually, in each of our areas. Thus Bob would be primed, ready for questions - sometimes of delicate nature. In addition, as mentioned, I helped write a lot of speeches. I accompanied the Assistant Secretary on various appearances around the country and sometimes abroad. All told, the assignment provided a very fascinating insight into U.S. government operations.

Q: Good experience for a USIA officer, I imagine.

AMERSON: Yes, useful for the officer, for the Department and for the Agency. I think officer exchange still is being practiced, is it not? USIA officers go over there, State people at USIA? In any case, I found it good preparation for me for my next assignment in the Agency's Latin American Area.

1968: Assignment as Assistant Director of USIA for Latin America

Q: You were at State about two years?

AMERSON: I went to the department in '66. Then in '68 when Leonard Marks needed somebody to fill in behind my old friend George Rylance, who was about to leave as Area Director I came over to be George's deputy for a few months. Then when George was assigned to Mexico, I became the Assistant Director of USIA for Latin America. One of the big jobs in the agency, still is I'm sure. It's been said, I don't know to what extent it's true, that those were the days when the Area Directors had more decision making powers than was subsequently true within the Agency.

Q: I think that's very true because you were involved in personnel, all its programming.

AMERSON: Very much.

Q: Administration, the whole works. And that has somewhat changed.

AMERSON: Those were interesting years, of long hours, hard work and involvement with the entire Latin American area - including a lot of travel, of course.

Q: Do you recall some of the major issues and concerns in that period? Of course, there was the Alliance for Progress. We were concerned about economic and social welfare.

The Problems Incidental to the Chilean Experience

AMERSON: Well, there are several levels of answer to your question, I guess. One of the principal issues or political/policy issues of concern had to do with Chile, of course. In the late '60s, early '70s you remember what was happening there after the Allende victory gave Chile the only major "Marxist" government in South America. As we all know, this became a matter of considerable concern to high level people in the United States government. For us in USIA, it meant trying to function normally under circumstances that were becoming increasingly difficult in Chile.

Relations Between Area Directors and Media Heads

Q: Would you comment a little bit about the role of the Assistant Director for the various areas, the Area Directors?

AMERSON: All right. What I can comment on really is based on my own experience within the Washington bureaucracy here - what's developed since, I'm not really competent to make any judgments about. But I felt then pretty strongly that the people who knew the most about the intended audiences or conditions within that audience ought to be the ones who had the most influence on the decision making process within the Agency.

For instance, when I was Area Director there were constant confrontations or at least minor conflicts between the areas and the media services for motion pictures - IMV, then. For the Agency's very strong and talented movie maker, Bruce Herschensohn, it was undoubtedly painful every time he would have to come up and try out a nearly-ready film, to get reactions from the Area Officers. I suspect that sometimes the Area Directors or their Deputies reacted a bit more stoutly than they really needed to or asserted more prerogative than was necessary.

Naturally, this geographic nagging by the Areas built up a crust of frustration on the part of Bruce and his creative people. As Agency Deputy Director, Henry Loomis was called upon to judge the issue, and eventually he decided on a compromise formula: no more would the Areas in Washington have sign off prerogatives with respect to films. Leave film making to the film maker. The service would come up with a given film and then send it out to the field and let each post decide how much they wanted to use without Area-office interference.

I left Washington before the final judgment came in - if it has - on how well that worked. But I do believe that some input from the people who should best know the geographical propensities and idiosyncrasies ought to be worked into a media product before you send it out to that area blindly. Values, potential reactions in one culture are not the same as in another.

Q: So the Area Directors are in a better position to know both the policy and the culture of the audience that's going to receive these messages.

AMERSON: If they're doing their job right they should be the principal authority within the agency for audiences within that area, sure. It seems to me so.

Q: And did you find that the media people tend to want to stress the entertainment value more?

AMERSON: Well, the media people had some very good strong ideas on the substantive things too. It's a matter of how to approach it. There weren't any great differences. I want to underline that. But to do without the expertise of the Area office seemed to me short sighted.

Q: Were there any other issues in those days as far as the bureaucracy was concerned? For example, is this the period, when you were Area Director, that it almost seemed every year we had a smaller budget?

AMERSON: Well, we all grew old listening to such coined terms as BALPA and OP - what was it? BALPA was balance-the-budget kind of thing. And OPRED - was that right?

Q: OPRED, yeah.

AMERSON: Both budget cutting exercises. And I suppose they were severe in those years. I suspect that others who came before or after will have similar memories of the need to cut back. And that's always a painful proposition. The halcyon years, I suppose, for Latin America especially were the years of the early Kennedy Administration and the Alliance for Progress when everything was expanding and hopeful and optimistic. By putting more people and more money to work doing the job, we were sure to succeed. We've all become a little bit disillusioned on that score since, I'm afraid.

Cultural-Informational Relations

Q: Did you ever have any problem with - or did you ever perceive any conflict between - the culture and information sides as some people like to talk about?

AMERSON: Gosh no, not personally. Though my early professional years were in information work, I've always been involved in cultural affairs, too, and I think fully appreciative of the value on a long-term basis of cultural relations, exchange programs and educational services. Indeed after my retirement up in Boston I was very heavily involved in the domestic side of the exchange program working with (I guess you mentioned this in your introduction) and serving as the president of the Center for International Visitors there - as a testimony to the degree to which this former "Information type," at least, personally feels the importance of cultural programs. It seems to me that agency officers in general ought to be well enough rounded that we don't have to slice everything down the middle, and let programs fall on one side or the other. We can integrate what's best of both sides.

Q: Is there anything else you might want to comment about your experience as an Area Director?

AMERSON: Well, from a personal point of view, looking back I think for any of us who have done that job - and there have been many, many by now - it's one of the privileges of a career to be in charge for a while of a given geographical area. "In charge" in the sense of being a point of coordination. One is never completely in charge of an Area - it's a matter of working with other people and getting the best possible results. But you do have a sense, or you did in those days especially, of carrying a certain degree of responsibility for people - for their effectiveness, their wellbeing, their future assignments. Maybe this is less true now if Area Directors are less involved in personnel assignments. In any case, I have very good memories about my years as an Area Director.

CPAO: Madrid: Different From Latin America

Q: Your next overseas assignment was to Madrid as Director of USIA programs in Spain. Can you tell us about that?

AMERSON: Well, anyone who's learned Spanish and lived in Latin America a lot welcomes the notion of returning to the "mother country." I had visited Spain years before on a private basis. So the idea of returning to live at the source of Latin America's Latin culture, Spanish-speaking Latin America, was a very satisfying thing. But those who assume that going to Spain is like going to another country in Latin America make a serious error, as you well know.

Spain is European, it's Arabic, it's Spanish - Mediterranean, not Western Hemisphere, not Latin America. And it's not a little underdeveloped country even though it is behind in economic development compared to much of Western Europe. So Spain and Spanish culture are unique. And the Spanish position in the western hemisphere, in the European and NATO context, is also different as we're seeing these days with more nationalism being exerted there and U.S. planes being asked to leave.

My time there fell in what were expected to be "the last years of Franco." And, of course, there were interesting times because you'd never know from one day to the next how much longer the old man would last and what would happen when he disappeared. Can I tell a Spanish joke?

Q: Sure, that would be great.

AMERSON: Political humor is always worth citing, I suppose, and this one provides a little bit of insight. It has to do with Franco, 90 some years old, doddering and weak and lying in what was generally assumed to be his deathbed. And the great crowds of Falangistas and other Franco supporters were outside his window sensing that the grand old man was about to die. And after 35 years of Spanish rule they wanted to pay their last homage to this venerated leader, the Caudillo. And, so outside his palace they were shouting "O Franco, adios Franco, adios!" And Franco up in his room, pale as the sheets he's lying between, raises himself up on one elbow and says, "Adios, adios? They are telling me adios. Where are they going?"

He in fact lasted another couple of years and it fell to my successor, my old pal George Rylance, as PAO to observe Spain's transition from dictatorship to democracy. But Spain was very richly rewarding as a place to be, for many reasons - including its diversity of cultures - I have long been a fan of flamenco music and Spanish folklore.

Q: And the American military bases were then in full swing, weren't they?

AMERSON: Yes, fully operational. And in the Franco years the U.S.-Spain military agreement was renewed periodically without much controversy, publicly. There was always concern on the part of the USA as to how long it would last, obviously. Spain provided an important strategic or logistical piece of geography - as you know in Spain the sun shines and you can fly airplanes when you can't in northern Europe, as regards Western defense strategy. And the submarine base at Rota on the southern coast, near the Mediterranean's choke point off Gibraltar, was terribly important from the strategic point of view.

Q: So USIS had programs related to the bases agreement, didn't it?

AMERSON: Some, yes, but never very much emphasis. We tried to avoid controversy. We had a good cultural center in Madrid, did a lot with the library and exchange program as well. And we never got very political in our output, as such - though I might add that our CAO, Lee Johnson, had established some of the best political contacts possible with opposition figures especially around the universities. I'd hoped to see more of this develop during a second two-year tour there, but this was interrupted by a phone call from our Agency personnel director, Mosley, saying - this is the segue into our next chapter I suppose - saying, we're going to need somebody who speaks Italian to go back to Italy. I had mixed feelings about that. And my wife certainly did. Our two kids in school, the idea of moving every two years, and all that. But it turned out that going back to Rome as PAO after having been away from Italy for ten years was -

PAO: Rome, 1973

Q: This was now in 1973?

AMERSON: '73, right. Past experience made it easy to get back into the post and the work and the living style, language and culture. I'd never really lost Italian, having learned it mainly, as I guess I mentioned, from the barbers and from a local employee in Venezuela many years before.

Q: With a Spanish flavor maybe.

AMERSON: Maybe so. But going back to Rome was a lovely thing to do. And, of course, Italy is a very important and very rewarding country to serve in. We lived there for eight of the 24 years of USIA work which is probably more than anybody really deserves. But as we say, somebody had to go there.

Q: Did you have some more presidential visits then when you were back on that tour?

AMERSON: Yes, but I think the only presidential visit in four years was that of Gerald Ford. And he and his staffers were easy to work with. One of his advisors was Bob Hartmann, with whom my acquaintance went all the way back to the Nixon visit in Caracas, when Bob was an accompanying writer for the Los Angeles Times. So we had that in common. He was very useful to us during the Ford visit to Rome. But no problems. Rome as a USIS post is so experienced in these things: dig up Plan A, and in a few days we've got it going.

I don't know that we had any one principal concern overshadowing U.S.-Italian relations, though the perennial political issue always present concerns potential participation in Italian politics of the famous Italian communist party. What would it mean if they become full partners in the government? So that issue colored a lot of our public statements, ambassadorial speeches or responses to press inquiries. What came out of a Washington press conference or State Department noon briefing could be reproduced in the Italian press, and cause quite a stir. The question of Italian communists was always a sensitive issue.

Q: And terrorism wasn't an issue in those days like it later became.

Memories: Recalling the Earlier Terrorism Problems in Bogota

AMERSON: True. Again, I guess I personally was lucky in that sense. Let me turn the clock backward again for a moment, because I don't want to pass over terrorism without noting that we had our share of it in Bogota. We've talked about Bogota and our being there before the drug issue arose. But there were occasional spurts of anti-American and anti-government terrorism in those years, too. Indeed, fifteen sticks of dynamite were removed 10 minutes or so before they were set to explode right outside my wall about six o'clock one evening at the Embassy. Bombs were going off in the city from time to time; indeed, right after I left bombs in our binational center killed some personnel and caused severe damage. So terrorism was even then a thing to be reckoned with.

And Early Terrorism in Rome

But getting back to Italy: yes, the Red Brigades had begun their operation during my second four years there. At that time no Americans apparently had been targeted by them. Had we been, there would probably have been very little we could do about it, as subsequent events have demonstrated. So it could have happened, all right, and we had to be aware. But we never had to deal with the degree of security risk and prevention that people are living with there today. That aspect of foreign service life certainly has deteriorated the last ten years.

Murrow Fellow at Fletcher School

Q: And in your last assignment before you decided to retire you were given the distinguished and prestigious position of being the Murrow Fellow at Fletcher. What did that entail?

AMERSON: Well, as you know the Agency has had for many years an arrangement with the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, part of Tufts University near Boston, of having a senior officer there as a lecturer, a scholar, as someone to relate to the students, to conduct a seminar and undertake similar things. By this time, after three PAO assignments and the stint as Area Director I had been feeling it would be nice to get back to an academic kind of situation away from the stresses of budget personnel problems or meetings that went on indefinitely - the work day routine. I didn't disdain any of that, but comes a time when you want a change of pace. And so I had asked our then Director, Jim Keogh, for the Fletcher assignment, and it came through. I really did enjoy it. Getting back to brushing with young minds again, having time to read books and to take in plays and lectures; and of course Boston, Cambridge and that whole area is so effervescent with ideas and intellectualism that it was a very stimulating experience just by itself.

Q: Did you work on any specific research project? Or did you mainly do just draw on your experience in lectures?

AMERSON: I think the latter, more than the former. I did not undertake a specific project, such as writing a book on foreign affairs, but had a number of things going of a modest nature. Our old USIA colleague and friend, Hewson Ryan, was the Murrow professor at Fletcher by then, and I worked with him on several projects - including conferences in Cairo and in Colorado. My wife and I enjoyed living in downtown Boston. In fact, it was going along so well and so effectively that everyone agreed that I should do it a second year, which I did. At that point although posts were being offered by the Agency to go back to the field, I figured that by now we'd done just about everything there was to do in the Agency, and more would be repetition. And while that's not so bad, it's also true that the world is filled with a number of things that can beckon. So we decided - with a certain amount of regret - to cut the old cord and go out into the wide world.

Q: Would you like to add anything that perhaps we haven't covered before we end this interview or make any final observations?

AMERSON: Well, if we're being philosophical I would say that I can't imagine a better career for anyone, at least anyone of my own makeup than a career with USIA in the area of ideas and operations and communications directly with people overseas. I have never had anything but very positive feelings about our years with the Agency and the rewards of foreign service. And no regrets either about our decision to retire early. Perhaps we hit the high points and quit while we were ahead.

And life afterward has been very rewarding as well. I've done various other things that Agency experience helped prepare me for, and that have provided other dimensions to living. Now I'm indulging in the pastime which I suppose is common to many of us at this stage of life - looking back, as we're doing in this very interview, and figuring out where we've been and what does it mean, the significance of this or that. I'm doing some personal writing on my own, in fact, about these very experiences. So this is a welcome chance to set some of it down.

Q: Well, thanks a lot.

AMERSON: My pleasure.

Q: This has been an interview with Robert C. Amerson, Retired Foreign Service Officer of USIA, conducted May 5, 1988 in Washington, D.C. The interviewer has been Allen Hansen.

End of interview